

**A RESPONSE TO NICHOLAS DENYSENKO'S  
"ECHOES OF NICAEEA: MINISTRY OF THE  
BAPTIZED IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY"**

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Thank you Rev. Dr. Denysenko. And thank you to the 79th CTSA Convention President, Nancy Pineda-Madrid, and President-Elect Susan Abraham for inviting to me to respond to such a wonderful and thought-provoking plenary address.

My remarks this evening are divided into three categories: the appreciative; the clarificatory, relative to the past; and the exploratory, relative to the present and future.

***CATEGORY ONE...THE APPRECIATIVE***

First, in drawing our attention to the baptismal practices and theology of the Nicene era, Denysenko reminds us that tradition encompasses more than doctrine. By way of this expansive sense of tradition I read Denysenko as offering a kind of *ressourcement* with respect to baptismal theology. It is important to understand that during this 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, there is something else equally important from that period of time that we can retrieve and learn from. But what Denysenko proposes is not a simple or naïve assimilation to the past. What is retrieved from the past is dynamically interpreted through and also adapted to the present. Often deployed from the center of the modern/colonial world-system, promoters of theologies of retrieval *have been known* to be at odds with prophetic theologies advocated from the margins. Denysenko, however, avoids this pitfall by guiding us in a remembering of Nicaea-era baptism that operates as a retrieval of pastoral urgency in a prophetic key, precisely because it is an urgency for healing the trauma of those within the church, so that—I presume—they may be equipped to do the same also for those outside of the church. To that end, Denysenko offers us a baptismal theology of trauma recovery and healing.

***CATEGORY TWO...THE CLARIFICATORY (RELATIVE TO THE PAST)***

While strongly affirming Denysenko's call for renewal of the early church's liturgical theology of baptism, I would like to raise a question of clarification about reframing the periodization of this baptismal theology of trauma-healing. Specifically, I wonder whether or not Denysenko is pointing us toward a need for retrieval of pre-

Nicene rather than Nicene baptismal theology. Focusing on Nicene-era baptismal theology invites us to consider it in relationship to the baptismal theology of the pre-Nicene and post-Nicene periods. In my proposed periodization, I locate the Nicene era between 313 CE, with Constantine’s decriminalization of Christian *religio*, and 381 CE, when Emperor Theodosius I convened a meeting of 150 bishops in Constantinople to confirm the Nicene Creed. Accordingly, the pre- and post-Nicene eras fall before and after the proposed start and end dates, respectively.

If we situate the rite of baptism as the culmination of a larger initiatory process into Christian life—that is, a process of conversion from one way of life to another—we can trace continuity and change between these periods a bit more clearly. The work of Mennonite scholar and church historian Alan Kreider is helpful here. Kreider observed that in the early church conversion entailed change of belief, belonging, and behavior, and that the conversion process seems to have occurred in four stages. Stage one, *evangelization*, involved conversations with non-Christians.<sup>1</sup> Stage two, *the catechumenate*, “seems to have concentrated on a reshaping of the converts’ behavior.”<sup>2</sup> Stage three, *enlightenment*, in which catechists focused on imparting “orthodox teaching” and catechumens received exorcisms and preparation “culminating in the baptismal rites.”<sup>3</sup> Stage four, *mystagogy*, was introduced in the fourth century, the Nicene era, and involved catechists explaining the meaning and experience of baptismal and eucharistic rites to the new initiates a week after Easter.<sup>4</sup> Stage two is where we see the most significant differences between the pre- and post-Nicene periods, so I will focus our attention there.

During the pre-Nicene period, before admission into the catechumenate, catechetical instructors performed a thorough “scrutiny” of the prospective candidates’ character, requiring a promise not to kill if they were in the military or other compromising careers; and expelling soldiers who did take a life and catechumens who joined the legion. In the post-Nicene period, admission into the catechumenate is no longer difficult. In some places, the sponsor and/or candidate only needed to fill out a boilerplate form letter.<sup>5</sup> During the pre-Nicene era, stage two was the longest stage, entailing a daily catechesis that could last as long as three to five years! In the post-Nicene era, stage 2 is much shorter. For instance, by the first quarter of the sixth century, in Arles (in southern France), only seven to ten days were dedicated to baptismal preparation.<sup>6</sup> In the pre-Nicene period, aristocrats like Cyprian of Carthage experienced the long process of conversion as a liberation from the addictions and compulsions of wealth, enabling them to carry out their baptismal vocation.<sup>7</sup> On the post-Nicene side of the timeline, we find Augustine informing the aristocrat Volusian that “conversion would not require a fundamental change in aristocratic behavior (*Epp*

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 22, italics in original.

<sup>3</sup> Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 8–9.

137–38).<sup>8</sup> Finally, while stage two in pre-Nicene baptismal preparation emphasized change in behavior, in the post-Nicene era, the emphasis of stage two instruction was on belief; specifically, familiarizing the candidates with the various heresies they must avoid.<sup>9</sup>

Another important feature of the post-Nicene epoch at odds with the pre-Nicene period is what we might call here a baptismal theology of compulsion. Early in this period, Christians increasingly express gratuitous approbation for compelled baptism and disenfranchisement of the non-baptized within wider late antique society. Could the pre-Nicene Christians—formed into one body through a baptism that enabled them to receive the eucharist and perform the kiss of peace, who repeatedly emphasized that their distinctiveness was in that they prayed for their enemies, whose initial scrutiny rejected the soldier or the catechumen who joined the military—could the Christians formed in the baptismal theology of that era have said with Augustine, “For long Christians did not dare answer a pagan; now, *thank God*, it is a crime to remain a pagan?”<sup>10</sup> Or could the pre-Nicene Christians have truly been comfortable with Bishop Avitus I of Clermont’s message in 576 to the city’s Jewish inhabitants, after a Christian mob had burned down their synagogue: “I do not use force nor do I compel you to confess the Son of God. I merely preach to you. . . . If you are prepared to believe what I believe, then become one flock, with me as your shepherd. If not, then leave this place.”<sup>11</sup> Such sentiment is expressive of a tendency that culminates in the tradition of medieval and early modern violent evangelization. While heralded by militant conquering Catholic Christians as a source of salvation, post-Nicene baptism was undoubtedly a source of trauma for the forcefully baptized, from the Saxon tribes in late eighth-century western Europe to the Taino peoples in the Caribbean region of the Americas in late fifteenth-century. It is difficult not to assess this development as a direct countersign of a baptismal theology of trauma recovery and healing as proposed by Denysenko and intimated in Kreider’s account of pre-Nicene baptismal preparation.

Given the significant discrepancies between pre-Nicene and post-Nicene baptismal preparation as well as the drastic difference in attitude toward Christian violence against the unbaptized, the Nicene period seems to be a hinge point. Nicene-era baptismal theology has features from the era that preceded it. But while keeping the form of the process and the rites, traditional emphases were slowly morphed during this period, such that the baptismal experience of the post-Nicene epoch manifests a significantly different ethos than that of the pre-Nicene era. If I am correct in my suggestion that the Nicene era is a turning point for baptismal theology, advancing a change in direction we see fully only in the post-Nicene church, then do we need to reclassify Denysenko’s proposed period for retrieving the most effective trauma-sensitive baptismal theology as pre-Nicene rather than Nicene?

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<sup>8</sup> Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> Kreider, *The Change of Conversion*, 43–47.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms* 89 (Kreider’s translation).

<sup>11</sup> Kreider, *Change of Conversion*, 89.

### CATEGORY THREE...THE EXPLORATORY (RELATIVE THE PRESENT AND FUTURE)

If we engage Denysenko's proposal seriously—as I believe we should—how do we begin to put baptismal theology of trauma healing into constructive conversation with the various insightful responses to the multitude of trauma-inducing problems today? For instance, how might we engage with Denysenko's retrieval from a decolonial, global church, or intercultural perspective? In each of these areas, we run into the dynamic of retrieval and inculturation. If retrieval implies an unchangeable form, can our one baptism avoid cultural imposition? If retrieval implies an unchangeable purpose preserved through perhaps wildly diverse adaptations of form, how would the established churches epistemologically, theologically, and practically “manage” a multiplicity (or pluriversity<sup>12</sup>) of forms to the baptismal rite?

Furthermore, we might ask: How does “one baptism” that responds to trauma interact with non-Western cultures that already have longstanding rituals that aid in various forms of healing. Take, for instance, the San Bushmen's healing dance, in which several members of the community—both men and women—dance themselves into a trance state, enabling them to heal community members who are present.<sup>13</sup> Or consider the Sun Dance practiced by many indigenous peoples of the Great Plains and Canadian Prairies. This ceremony involves physical trauma to the persons performing the dance, as they are connected to a sacred pole by rawhide thongs that pierce their flesh. Yet, this ritual-physio-trauma is also arguably embedded within a larger ceremonial process of trauma prevention, reduction, and recovery, a process that engenders “one people” as does the trauma-responsive “one baptism” Denysenko describes. As Native American theologian George “Tink” Tinker, a member of the Osage Nation and an ordained Lutheran minister informs: “As the community gathers to cut down the tree marked for use in the center of a Sun Dance, the community members collect their thoughts so that the people might have *a single heart and a single mind* among themselves.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Pluriversity” is a prominent idea with decolonial theory and practice. See, Janet Conway and Jakeet Singh, “Radical Democracy in Global Perspective: Notes from the Pluriverse,” *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2011): 689–706, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.570029>. They provide an instructive sense of its meaning: “Notions of the pluriverse imply multiple ontologies, multiple worlds to be Known—not simply multiple perspectives on one world. Universalist discourses and globalist projects are grounded in a unitary ontology and imperialist epistemologies which assume that the world is one, that it is knowable on a global scale within single modes of thought, and is thus manageable and governable in those terms” (701).

<sup>13</sup> See, Megan Biesele, Kxao =Oma., and /'Angnlaio /'Un, “Peace Technologies from the San Bushmen of Africa,” in *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future*, ed. Melissa K. Nelson, (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2008), 75–83. Sharing her experience among the San Bushman, Biesele writes: “What people have told me about what's going on in these beautiful dances is that it's a technology of opening the heart so that healing energy can enter and so that people's hearts will be revealed to each other and any problems or enmity will go out from between them. ...I kept finding that everything comes back to the healing dance” (77).

<sup>14</sup> George “Tink” Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 39, my italics. In Tinker's brief description of the

Are Christians from Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions to say that the one baptism in its trauma-reduction aspects are universally sufficient and superior to non-Western, non-Christian cultural and regional ceremonies that may perform similar functions, and some of which may be older than Christianity? Do we encourage or at least not discourage synthesis of the one baptismal ritual and other pre-existing rituals? Do we begin to see baptism into the church as an initiation rite into a Christian community that does not demand the abrogation of other traditional rituals, especially if these rituals contribute to healing trauma within these communities? And how do we reckon with the fact that such a turn goes against the grain of most of Christian history?

Lastly: MaryCatherine McDonald, a researcher in the philosophy of psychology who specializes in the psychology of trauma, argues that we oversimplify the complexity of healing when we think a singular mode or method of intervention for trauma healing is sufficient.<sup>15</sup> She proposes we think in terms of a toolbox containing several tools that assist the healing process. In light of his recentering the pastoral urgency of baptism through the recovery of its originary and intrinsic contribution to trauma healing, I would be curious to hear if Denysenko thinks of baptism as one “tool” among many available within the Christian tradition, and if so, does it stand as the ritual *par excellence*, in this regard? Additionally, is there something about our one baptism, when understood in intrinsic relation to trauma-healing, that opens us up to accepting the existence and legitimacy of multiple trauma-healing ritual tools developed by non-Western, pre-Christian cultures? Ultimately, I would like to thank Rev. Dr. Denysenko for inviting us to consider our one baptism in relation both to healing the trauma of Christians within the church and for responding effectively to the trauma of the world—and perhaps particularly the trauma Christian churches have caused in the world.

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ceremony, the reason for the sacred manner in which the chosen tree is cut down can be interpreted as healing trauma: In a worldview that promotes harmony and balance (or equilibrium and homeostasis), the innate violence of felling the tree requires acknowledgement, as well as explanation and thanksgiving to the tree. Importantly, the men catch the tree so as to not let it fall violently and irreverently to the ground, an act that reduces the trauma the tree experiences and thereby also mitigates the trauma to the land (local, living place) and, by extension, to the world (cosmic whole).

<sup>15</sup> MaryCatherine McDonald, *Unbroken: The Trauma Response is Never Wrong* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2023), 5.